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Veiled in Ignorance and Clothed in Reason: Jimmie Durham's 2014 Exhibition *Traces and Shiny Evidence*

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Detail of 2014 *Traces and Shiny Evidence* installation at Parasol unit foundation for contemporary art, London. Image courtesy of Jimmie Durham. Photo Kai Vollmer.

Artist, poet, essayist, and activist Jimmie Durham's five decade career investigates European and American nation-building and colonization in the contexts of politics and culture. Raised Cherokee in the United States, trained as a sculptor in Europe, active in the American Indian Movement in both places, and exhibited internationally as a multi-media artist, Durham is now based in Berlin and Naples, and focused on undermining narratives and structures that uphold Eurocentric institutions and practices. He does so by putting building blocks of communication—bodily expression, language, and physical materials—into surprising and often humorous relationships that subvert hierarchy, logic, and belief. Durham's work is not didactic: it does not produce stable meaning or deliver a clear message. Conscious that a will to do so would replace one ideological imperative for another, Durham courts confusion and welcomes interruption. His performances, writings, installations, and objects solicit attention through unobtrusive wit, sustain interest with surprising juxtaposition, and finally engage with intellectual rigor.

Durham's 2014 exhibition *Traces and Shiny Evidence*, shown at Parasol unit foundation for contemporary art in London, had several components. Durham showed on one floor brightly colored oil barrels, car parts, PVC pipes, and reproduction animal skeletons covered with or leaking ooze that shimmered with rainbow hues. On a floor one level up, Durham exhibited wall size drawing/prints he made by throwing stuffed animals coated with charcoal at very large pieces of paper. In the video that recorded Durham making the drawing/prints, the artist wears a workman's vest labeled "Steiner. Maison de la Paix." A 2004 video featured in the exhibition itself, shows Durham in a business suit seated at a desk, using a stone to smash varied objects brought to him for which he exchanges a cursorily stamped and signed receipt. In conjunction with *Traces and Shiny Evidence*, Durham delivered an artist talk that was videotaped. In it he discusses his project while covered with cheap, brilliantly colored cloth: striped material draped around his shoulders and translucent, flowered material placed over his head.

In his videotaped talk, Durham remarks that materials—fabric or any other substances— are innocent but our ways of using them are not. He notes that the cloth he wears is made of petroleum, the key substance referenced and employed in his London exhibition. Naturally-occurring oil produced from decayed marine fossils, when refined, petroleum is used to make fuels and consumer products. Among the former are diesel, gasoline, kerosene, jet fuel, and propane. The latter include antifreeze, detergents, fertilizers, paints, pesticides, plastics, refrigerants, solvents, and the synthetic fibers that go into many textiles. Drilling for oil; refining petroleum; burning gasoline; marine and land oil spills; as well as incinerating, dumping, and burying trash made with petroleum, produce horrifying amounts of air, water, and ground pollution and hugely contribute to climate change. Covered in brilliant and shimmering synthetic cloth, in his artist talk, Durham verbally invites us to consider what his exhibition makes visually clear: that traces and evidence of petroleum in our world veil such troubling conditions under shiny surfaces. In what follows, I explore how Durham uses textiles—business suit, workman's vest, stuffed animals, decorative yardage—to investigate this scenario in *Traces and Shiny Evidence*.

Durham's attire in his 2004 performance "Smashing," and in the videos made of his drawing/print and his artist talk for *Traces and Shiny Evidence*, communicate ideas about how humans both create and destroy with the natural materials they put to use. In "Smashing," Durham performs as an officious bureaucrat who pulverizes manmade objects with a stone, suggesting that man builds institutions from earth's very foundation that crush things we produce to shape our lives. This video sets up the personal and political stakes of Durham's exhibition: when we view a representative of the state stone things of individual significance, our own losses in the face of cold bureaucracy resonate. When we reflect in turn on the inter-relationships of nature and the man-made within this crushing dynamic, we consider the places we occupy with respect to use and value. Stones exist. We take them up, like other natural elements, to create what both upholds and dismantles. This is true too of petroleum, the name of which is derived from Latin for stone—*petra*—and oil—*oleum*. We extract and make from petroleum thousands of products that serve and often delight us, while negatively impacting earth, air, and water.

The dirty stuffed animals, discarded oil drums, plastic pipe segments, and broken car parts in Durham's show all resemble the refuse we produce, thereby encouraging us to question our roles in destroying nature—referenced by the artist's animal skeletons—while creating the built environment. Durham's artist talk does the same while incorporating spoken words into the mix. However, these words hardly clarify what he communicates visually, for Durham does not produce a clear narrative that provides answers to the questions he raises or solutions to the problems he represents. But this does not mean that we are left in the space of pulverized relations set up in "Smashing." We are situated in unstable terrain, but shown by Durham that we might think creatively and constructively about our conundrums. Just as his garb in his 2004 video helps set a stage for thought and action, so too do Durham's vestments in his 2014 performances.

In the footage that records the artist making his drawing-prints, Durham is wearing worker attire: dark gray trousers and shirt offset by a neon orange vest with reflective strips, which reads "Steiner. Maison de la Paix. Genève." The brilliant orange provides a burst of color in an otherwise monochromatic assemblage of space, person, and objects, for the papered gallery is

white, the materials with which Durham makes his art are black, and Durham along with the garbage bag he carries are gray. The neon, shiny vest, which moves through space as Durham ambulates, pulses with color and gloss like that of the industrially-fabricated installation elements arranged and interconnected in the exhibition gallery below. Making and the made are thus highlighted, and done so with the luridly bright color used in highlighter pens. The arrested focus we associate with marking up text is an important component in Durham's creation of the print-drawing; indeed several shots in the video show him steadfastly eyeing his work in progress. However, the physicality of making and the motion it entails is also crucial to the piece: Durham drops stuffed animals into his trash bag of charcoal dust, shakes the bag vigorously, and then throws or places the coated textile creatures against the papered walls to index both their thingness and movement. Durham's bright workman's vest emphasizes the constructive nature of acts that may also be viewed as destructive. Indeed, his garment's association with both construction labor and trash collection, in the context of fine art troubles distinctions between so-called skilled and unskilled labor. The words on the vest extend and build upon these opposed linkages. "Steiner," is a German last name whose root means stone, and it refers to someone who is a quarryman, stone cutter, or stonemason, all occupations which entail breaking and/or building with stone. The Geneva "La Maison de la Paix"—which means House of Peace—is a building complex that houses an international institute with three centers created to promote peace: one for security policy, another for de-mining (removal of buried bombs), and a third for democratic control of armed forces. Such language points to the dichotomies that concern Durham: constructive efforts involve the deconstructive and vice versa. In the context of building a house of peace, this is particularly troubling, for Durham's juxtaposition of forms and words, and the institutions they reference, suggest that war and peace are integrally interwoven.

Durham furthers such associations through the other cloth items he employs in his print/drawings: several stuffed animals that when covered with charcoal and thrown at papered walls, reveal their physical and transitory states. We never see the animals without their jet-black coating, and we always see them in use: Durham drops and shakes them vigorously and loudly in the garbage bag filled with charcoal, and he flings and rubs them to make marks. They are thus vehicles, extensions of the artist that he makes creative while he equally appears to wear them down. Stuffed animals provide children with comfort as they struggle with dependence and independence and Durham's textile creatures literally build upon and extend the practice of using living creatures to meet human need for physical and emotional support. So-called beasts of burden—transmuted into cute props for succor—like stone, shift from autonomous entities in a shared world to objects used for creative and/or destructive purposes. The very fabric of Durham's work, in this case a toy animal and a worker's vest, make this human dynamic evident.

Screen shot from video recording of the artist talk in which Jimmie Durham dons a "disguise" and discusses his practice, at Parasol unit foundation for contemporary art, London, 12 June 2014. Image courtesy of Parasol unit.

The fabric Durham uses in his artist talk for *Traces and Shiny Evidence* enables him to convey how we can both cover up and uncover evidence of our destructive use of material. In the video that records Durham's presentation, we see the artist seated close to his audience in a somewhat informal setting. He is not separated from others by a platform and podium and he speaks extemporaneously and colloquially as if storytelling. While these arrangements invite ease, they shape a space and relationship that shifts into moments of discomfort and confusion. Durham begins his talk by breaking down the name of the street where the exhibition space resides, and does so to produce a chain of associations that permits him to embody his purpose literally. The street is Goldhawk and Durham imagines it to be an Old English term for a person who hawks—sells—gold. He notes that the street is full of shops hawking beautiful material, and that material is the subject of his talk. He pulls out large pieces of brightly colored striped and floral cloth, and covers his shoulders and head with the material, which he says will make him look shiny and appear bright. Durham establishes a physical and conceptual link to the theme of his show: he explains that the cloth is made from petroleum, a natural material produced from biological matter broken down over long periods by bacteria to become oil that fuels vehicles and the production of countless goods. Such goods include not only the floral fabric that veils him—a reference to the plants that make petroleum and that in facsimile decorate our lives—but also the brightly-colored plastic pipes, car parts, and replica animal bones arranged amidst the shiny, rainbow-hued oil barrels in his exhibition installation. Although Durham's composition with these petroleum-based elements is artful, because the elements look like trash interspersed with dead animals and ooze that appears to leach into the ground, the beauty of what he has created points to the destruction unleashed by materials made from petroleum. Swathed in a petro-textile that he purchased, Durham suggests that he is not above or beyond the fraught scenario he bodies forth. Although he literally appears bright, he is enmeshed in human conditions that he calls stupid. Durham says that all materials are innocent but how we use them is not. When we take the raw stuff of the world to produce things, and when those things—however pretty and life enhancing they may appear to be—actually destroy, we are stupid. Durham is a faithful etymologist, and *stupere*, the Latin root of stupid, means to be amazed or stunned. Amazed and stunned by our bright and shiny creations, we often fail to see their dark side.

In *Traces and Shiny Evidence*, Durham makes this unfortunate truth literally evident while refusing to reinforce it. By creating a forceful contrast between plastic animal skeletons covered in shimmering colors and stuffed animals coated in inky black, Durham formally and conceptually makes it impossible for us to disregard the dark and focus on the bright. Although

the rainbow-hued skeletons seem to "prettify" petroleum as a fossil fuel that can destroy animal life, the black stuffed animals recall oil-drenched water fowl, casualties of major oil spills that haunt our imaginations. Indeed, the ghostly black and white print/drawings in the upper level of Durham's exhibition, with their charcoal smears made by textile creatures, secure this association. Black marks of destruction, these traces are like specters of the shiny evidence—in the form of plastic pipes, car parts, and bones—that the artist spreads across the lower level of his show. It is as if Durham puts us at the scene of a crime, and asks us to see ourselves as forensic pathologists, and ultimately, as culprits too.

I began this essay noting that Durham's work is often humorous, although perhaps only funny to those who laugh at bizarre eccentricity. And then once the serious implications of his project become evident, funny in the sense that if you don't laugh, you'll cry. However, *Traces and Shiny Evidence* does not land us in a space fraught with despair. The absurd acts and objects that comprise the exhibition point toward the dire, but do so through wonder, an emotion that sustains interest and reflection. Wonder is the key component of humor that philosopher Deborah Brown finds critical and motivating. In a 2005 essay, she writes the following:

> … our experience of humor… often involves a sudden reaction to something surprising, unexpected or not "as it is supposed to be," or to something expected or predictable but surprising in part because of that. It is an experience … which motivates us to remain in a state of pleasant attention to its object. In its primary sense, wonder presupposes a gap between the scenario presented and what we take for granted and can thus explain why forms of humor like ridicule are so effective against hypocrisy, irrationality, and inconsistency. These are obvious sites for such gaps to arise. Finally, as an aid to reason, wonder stimulates the same kind of explanatory processes used generally to close gaps between what we know and the way things appear, and thus stands on a continuum with the philosophical imagination.[1]

The absurdity of Durham's *Traces and Shiny Evidence*, which makes some laugh, does so because of wonder. His wit and creativity are wonders, as are his intelligence and ethics. And all work together to make us wonder at and about the circumstances our use of petroleum has produced. As Brown suggests, the wonder at the heart of much humor provides us with an aid to reason. Whether we can clothe ourselves in enough reason to solve the problems with petroleum remains to be seen. But in *Traces and Shiny Evidence* Durham suggests that we could start by removing our veil of ignorance.

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[1] Deborah Brown, "What Part of 'Know' Don't You Understand?," *The Monist*, Vol. 88, No. 1, Humor (January 2005), pp. 30-31.